THE COMMAND AND GENERAL STAFF SCHOOL
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

1929-1930

Second Year Class

CAVALRY IN MOUNTED ATTACK
AGAINST INFANTRY.
I. INTRODUCTION.

Since the War, a great deal has been said and written about the feasibility of mounted attack against infantry. The long drawn out trench warfare has, by its very duration, brought up questions as to the value of mounted troops. The fact remains, however, that during the last war charge after charge was ridden by both German and Allied Cavalry. Some of these charges were successful, while many were disastrous; for example, on August 12th, 1914, at Haelen, German Cavalry rode not less than ten successive charges against dismounted troops behind wire and other obstacles, resulting in terrible losses to the German Cavalry. This, first of all, was not a favorable opportunity for mounted combat on account of obstacles. There was a total absence of surprise, as the Cavalry making frontal attacks came in view early. The charges were made in close order and at no time was there any effort of maneuver to strike the enemy in flank, nor was there any appreciable fire support. (1-21 etc.) (2-149 etc.)

On the other hand, on November 13th, 1917, at El Mughar, the 6th Brigade British Yeomanry charged a Turkish position on a ridge, capturing about eleven hundred men, fourteen machine guns and two guns. Casualties of the Brigade, sixteen killed, one hundred and twenty-three wounded. Here we see a favorable opportunity boldly seized, the attack heavily supported by rifle, machine gun and artillery fire, and the Cavalry attacking in open order. It is interesting to note that this charge was ridden on request of the British Infantry which was held up and could not advance. (3-75-85) (4-470-472) (Map A)

From a critical study of the Cavalry actions of the Great War, the following is apparent to even the most enthusiastic supporter of the "Arme Blanche":

FIRST:

The great majority of the mounted attacks against infantry were disastrous where they were executed by large forces; consider for example (a) the attack at Haelen previously described, or (b) the attack of the 11th French Hussars at St. Hilaire la Grande in 1915 which was stopped by fire and wire entanglements 200 meters in front of the German trenches with heavy losses to the French. (5-42) There are of course some notable exceptions, as for example, the charge of the
six squadrons of the Ulan Brigade of the Bavarian Cavalry Division at La Garde [east of Nancy] in 1914. This Brigade successfully charged French Infantry and Artillery in position, capturing La Garde with important information and 1200 prisoners, thereby enabling the worn out German Infantry to advance. The losses of the Brigade were slight during the actual mounted attack until some dismounted fighting took place in the village of La Garde where heavier losses occurred. Unfortunately no detailed maps of these last two actions are available. (1-145-152) (5-55-36)  

SECOND:  

Many of the charges ridden against Infantry by smaller units, from a squadron to a regiment, were highly successful although casualties in some were heavy. I found actual record of thirty-nine charges ridden against Infantry during the War by units smaller than a brigade. Twenty-three of these charges occurred on the Western Front. (1) (2) (3) (5) Of the thirty-nine charges all with the exception of four were successful and accomplished the results desired; in about 40% of them the casualties were considerable but in many of the remaining 60% they were almost negligible. We know that there were a good many more charges of which we have as yet no detailed account, particularly on the Russian Front.  

II. GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR MOUNTED ATTACK AGAINST INFANTRY.  

Let us look at the principles governing mounted attack against Infantry as laid down in our own regulations. Our "Employment of Cavalry" states: "No hard or fast rule can be laid down as to precisely when mounted attack should be employed. There are, however, certain favorable conditions that a commander should carefully consider before committing a force to mounted action in any given situation."

The favorable conditions which I consider most important to mounted attack on Infantry are:

(1) An enemy suddenly encountered at close quarters.  
   (Many examples of patrol action.)

(2) An inferior, demoralized or retreating enemy.  
   (British Cavalry in pursuit to Damascus.)
(3) An enemy who may be attacked in flank or rear while pinned to the ground by effective fire or attack by other troops.

(British attack at Cerisy.)

(4) When quick results are required, Cavalry may cross fire swept areas under favorable conditions of terrain, surprise, or demoralization of the enemy, and by its mobility, advance to mounted attack with extended formations. Under such conditions losses will frequently be less than in dismounted attack. (Beersheba, the 4th Australian Light Horse Brigade captured the town, riding over Turkish trenches, results fifty officers and eleven hundred other ranks captured, casualties of the Brigade, thirty-two killed, thirty-two wounded. (7-65-79) (3-23-30) (Map B)

(5) Other friendly troops in distress in a situation where their relief must be effected even at the sacrifice of the mounted troops.

(Resonville, 16th of August, 1870. Six squadrons of the Brigade Bredow, to relieve overpowered Prussian Infantry, charged, wrecking six batteries, dispersing four French battalions, and checking the advance of an Army Corps.) (8-30-40) (9-197-200)

Mounted attack having been decided upon, it is not sufficient, in these days of machine guns and machine rifles, that the Cavalry hurl itself headlong at the enemy in one great mass, a la Seydlitz, or Murat. The great volume and accuracy of modern Infantry weapons have taught us certain lessons which are laid down in our "Employment of Cavalry" as guiding principles, and which must not only be thoroughly understood, but the application of which must be instinctive to the Cavalry leader. They are as follows:

(1) Against a dismounted enemy, Cavalry attacking suddenly from good cover has excellent chance of success, provided it
employs rapid movement and adopts suitable formations. Suitable fire support is desirable. (I believe that the word 'desirable' is hardly strong enough and that 'essential' must be substituted therefor.)

(2) Rapid movement of mounted units, supported by an intense and effective fire, constitutes characteristics of Cavalry action.

(3) In mounted action supporting fire is furnished by machine rifles, machine guns, Artillery and troops dismounted for that purpose.

(4) Against a dismounted enemy, the assault echelon is habitually deployed as foragers in several successive waves.

III. HISTORICAL EXAMPLES TO ILLUSTRATE ABOVE PRINCIPLES.

I have selected two Cavalry actions which I believe illustrate in an excellent way, both the proper application and the violation of the above principles, one from the Palestine Campaign and one from the Franco-Prussian War.

Let us take first the example from the Palestine Campaign, the action at Naher Falik, 19th September, 1917: (Map C)

In September, 1917, the Turkish line west of the Jordan ran from a point on the coast just north of the old Crusader Fort Arsuf generally southeast to the Jordan. Two railroads ran north from the Turkish line, one from Nablus to Afule, where it connected with the Haifa-Deera line and one east of the Jordan through Deera to Damascus. From this it can be seen that Afule, Beisan, and Deera were the vital points on the Turkish line of communication. General Allenby's plan was: To concentrate a large force of Infantry, together with three Cavalry divisions near the coast; the Infantry to break through and pivoting on Jiljulie to wheel to the right and bend back the Turkish line, like opening a door. The Cavalry was to dash through this door and advance rapidly northeast to seize Afule, then, riding down the valley of Jezreel to Beisan and the Jordan, cut the railroad at those two places, while an Arab force did the same at Deera. This would place a Cavalry net behind the Turks from the Sea to the Jordan, into which they were to be driven by the British Infantry.
On September 19th, following the successful breakthrough of the Infantry, the 5th Cavalry Division advanced along the coast, its goal Afula and Nazareth, its first objective Liktera, sixteen miles behind the Turkish front. The Nahr Falik was crossed near its mouth, and from then on the route lay over an open country, consisting of a series of low sand hills, frequently covered by tufts of tall grass and intersected by gullies. The 9th Hodson's Horse, an Indian Regiment, with a machine gun troop attached, formed the advance guard of the 5th Cavalry Division. D Squadron, with two machine guns, was the support, the remainder of the Regiment the reserve. When the support had advanced about six hundred yards from the Nahr Falik, it came under fire from a sand hill about a thousand yards to the north. As the line of advance on Liktera led to the northeast, the support continued its advance with the object of finding the enemy's flank, and, if possible, turning it. Under cover of the sand hills the support pushed forward and found a small knoll some four or five hundred yards on the eastern flank of the enemy unoccupied. The two machine guns were placed into action here and the squadron continued its advance to find whether the enemy had his left flank refused and if possible to reach his rear.

Meanwhile, the reserve in turn came under fire. The Commanding Officer immediately ordered a troop and two machine guns to seize a small sand hill to his left front in order to cover a mounted attack by the leading squadron of the reserve. The Turks were thus taken under machine gun fire from the right front and left flank, while a squadron in column of troops in open order, with a hundred yard distance between troops, suddenly charged out from between two sand hills about five hundred yards in their front, and rode straight at them. The Turks stood until the squadron was less than one hundred yards from them and then broke. Some were speared, some captured, but as the squadron was part of the advance guard, no long pursuit was carried out. Meanwhile the support had charged another position near their line of march and carried it. The casualties of the Cavalry in these actions were negligible, while about two hundred and fifty men, three Lewis guns and two guns were captured.
Now let us see how this action illustrates some of our principles.

First, here was a favorable opportunity for mounted action for the following reasons:

1. We have an enemy retreating, whose morale had undoubtedly been badly shaken by the Infantry breakthrough and the sudden appearance of the British Lancers behind their own lines.

2. The Turks could be pinned to the ground by fire from one or more directions, while attacked mounted from another.

3. Quick results were absolutely essential, as the breakthrough by the Cavalry had to be rapid to reach their objectives, which were about forty miles in rear of the Turkish lines, before it was discovered by the Turks.

Second, we find our principles of fire support and open formation illustrated in that the support commander immediately dropped his two machine guns in a position where they had practically enfilade fire on the Turks. The reserve commander in turn first of all, placed a troop and two machine guns in action, while his maneuvering force, forming under cover, suddenly attacked in open order and was on the enemy before he had time to realize what struck him.

Some of course will say that the Turks were inferior troops. It is true, they were retreating and therefore "meat" for boldly led Cavalry; but nevertheless, on the following day, troops of the same Corps put up some very stiff resistance against British Infantry and inflicted heavy casualties. It is hardly fair, then, to write down the success of this and other charges during the campaign to the demoralization of the Turks. Certainly the charges at Beersheba and El Mughar, which were ridden on the special request of the Infantry which had been brought to a standstill by the Turkish fire, were not made against a rabble, by any stretch of imagination.

General James H. Reeves, who formerly commanded the 8th Cavalry, told me that he had opportunity after the War, to talk to a German general officer who had been on the staff of the forces operating in Palestine. This
officer told him that the Turk had always fought stubbornly and well against British Infantry, but that after Beersheba and El Kughar there were two things that he would simply not stand up to and these were an aerial attack and a Cavalry charge. However, if one were to agree with those who consider the Turk an inferior fighter [an opinion certainly not shared in by the British Infantry which ought to know] then it must be admitted that here we have one of the few conditions which favor mounted attack against Infantry, viz., "an inferior, demoralized or retreating enemy." No one can say what might have happened had the Turks been British Infantry and the attackers German Cavalry, but to judge from some astonishing successes on the Western Front, I believe that the results would probably have been the same, perhaps the casualties of the Cavalry would have been heavier. On the Western Front the Cavalry strength was so small compared to the Infantry that accurate detailed descriptions of their attacks are few. Most reports state that a certain unit attacked mounted, either successfully or unsuccessfully, captured a certain terrain or certain troops and had a certain number of casualties. From the Palestine campaign where Cavalry actions were the rule rather than the exception, more detailed descriptions are available. Of the twenty-three mounted attacks against Infantry on the Western Front two are especially notable as they were fought in 1918, the last year of the War, viz., the attack of the British Cavalry at Villerselve (Map D) and the charge of the Canadian Cavalry at Moreuil Wood during the German offensive in March 1918. (Map E).

In the German drive of 1918 when the Allied armies were thrown back the British Cavalry was rushed from point to point in the lines as the enemy thrusts developed, filled gaps in the lines, fought rear guard actions and covered the withdrawal of their infantry. As an example, in the retreat from Chauny, the 20th and 36th Divisions at Faucourt and Cugny respectively were nearly cut off by the German advance on their flanks. These troops were enabled to withdraw by a mounted charge of a squadron of the 6th Cavalry Brigade which broke through the German lines, captured a number of prisoners, and sabered a large number of those who were holding up the infantry retirement. (11-201) (2-21)
In the sector of the 3d Corps the special advantages of cavalry for duty of this type were clearly demonstrated. "Troops of the 2d and 3d Cavalry Divisions, both mounted and dismounted, covered every section of the retreat, were able, because of the mobility of their horses and because of their ability to fight mounted as well as on foot, to concentrate quickly, reinforce threatened points, fill breaches in the line, turn in German flanks, and ride them down while they were held to the ground by the fire of the British infantry or dismounted cavalry. And the British cavalry were able to do this in a minimum of time when time meant everything. So pressing was the necessity for cavalry that several yeomanry regiments, recently dismounted, were hurriedly mounted and did excellent work. In the comments of General Haig, the British commander at this critical period, appears the statement, "Without the assistance of mounted troops, skillfully handled and gallantly led, the enemy could scarcely have been prevented from breaking through the long and thinly held front of broken and wooded ground before the French reinforcements had had time to arrive." (11-202)

In the vicinity of Moreuil the 1st, 2d, 3d Cavalry Divisions and the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, together with 4 infantry divisions established a line north from the Luce River. On March 30th, 1918 Moreuil Wood was held by 2 battalions of German infantry with "great numbers of machine guns which were mounted in every available vantage point, even in trees." 1200 troopers in 3 waves galloped through the German infantry and their machine guns and cleared the wood. (12-IV-212) (13-553-555)

Captain George King, US Infantry, now a student of the Second Year Class at the Command and General Staff School, vouches for the success of the Canadian Cavalry in this attack as follows: "I did not see the actual attack but I saw the Canadian Cavalry move forward to the attack and later saw them come back. The command which attacked mounted was not a very large one, perhaps 2 or 3 squadrons, but they brought back many more prisoners than their own number. That night at the British mess General Bridwell of the British Army, himself not a cavalryman, said in my presence; "Gentlemen, if it were
not for the splendid mounted attack of the Canadian Cavalry we would not be sitting here tonight, as the Germans would have cut off the majority of our command."

These two attacks ridden by small units, supported by heavy rifle and machine gun fire, were certainly highly successful and this in 1918 in the midst of trenches, aviation and against victorious troops.

As previously mentioned the majority of mounted attacks against Infantry ridden by large units were disastrous for the Cavalry showing clearly that unless the best and most favorable conditions are all present and the attack is very skillfully handled, it simply "can't be done".

In the following paragraph I shall describe another Cavalry attack by a large force which resulted in almost complete annihilation of the Cavalry. This attack occurred before machine guns and other automatic weapons were opposed to Cavalry and I am including it in this study principally to show that even in 1870 Cavalry could not override even "tired" infantry when it committed every tactical error known to God and man.

The example I have chosen is the charge of the Brigade Michel at Woerth, on August 6th, 1870, during the Franco-Prussian War. (Map F)

Shortly after the outbreak of the war, the Prussians invaded France and, at the Battle of Neissembourg defeated and practically destroyed a French Division. Following this battle, General MacMahon concentrated his Corps and two Cavalry Divisions in a carefully chosen position behind the Sauerbach near Woerth. He had with him five Infantry and two Cavalry divisions. At daybreak on August 6th the Prussian Infantry attacked. The French were outnumbered and by 4 PM completely routed. At about 2 PM the right wing of the French and the opposing Prussian troops were located about as shown on this map. The French were slowly retreating, putting up a stubborn defense during which the Prussian Infantry was again and again driven back with heavy losses. At this time MacMahon, bent on reestablishing his right, threw against the Prussian left Michel's Brigade of the 6th and 9th Cuirassiers and the 6th Lancers. This Brigade had been halted behind the corner of a wood about one-half mile north-west of Eberbach. At the moment, the Prussian Infantry, which had just reached
the heights west and northwest of Morsbron was being driven back by heavy fire from the copses southeast of Eberbach. At this crucial stage of the battle, the Cuirassiers appeared through the ranks of their own Infantry. In the first line came the 8th Cuirassiers in squadron columns followed on the right by three squadrons of the 9th in line, and still further to the right by the 6th Lancers, also in column. The 8th received immediately a terrible enfilade fire from the Landsberg which caused heavy losses. In addition they came under a heavy frontal fire from the 32nd Regiment, which literally mowed them down. The remainder, charging past the village, was fired on by skirmishers of the 80th Regiment. The 9th Cuirassiers fared no better. A pioneer company near the Prussian left received them at three hundred paces with a well aimed fire and broke up the charge. The Lancers struck the left of the Prussian line and were badly cut up by fire from the 8th Company of the 32nd Regiment. None of the attacks, with the exception of that of a small group of the 9th Cuirassiers went home. While rallying east of the village, the wreck of the Brigade was jumped by three squadrons of the 13th Prussian Hussars, who were halted behind a wood in squadron columns facing north, and themselves were much surprised to find French Cavalry suddenly in their rear. They wheeled about promptly, however, by troops, and charged from the halt. After a short melee the Prussians swept up the debris and brought in many prisoners and riderless horses.

An eye witness of the attack, a Prussian Infantry officer, describes the charge as follows:

"At the moment our Infantry was falling back down a slope from an attack which had failed, a hail of chassepot and mitrailleuse bullets following them, and everyone felt that he would never reach the cover of the wood which lay below us. Tired to death, and resigned to their fate, the Infantry were slowly crawling towards this wood. Suddenly the murderous fire ceased. Everyone stopped astonished to see what had saved them from the fate which seemed certain.
Then we saw the French Cuirassiers who, as they pushed forward, massed the fire of their own Infantry and Artillery. Those Cuirassiers appeared to us like guardian angels. With the most perfect calm every man halted on the spot where he stood and fired at the Cuirassiers who were soon swept away by the rapid fire.

Why was this charge so disastrous to the Cuirassiers? First of all, let us look at the terrain. Lieutenant Colonel Maude of the British Cavalry, in his book, says:

"The field of attack which apparently had not been previously reconnoitered, was extremely unfavorable. Single lines of trees, felled close above the ground and deep ditches hindered the movement, while the Infantry had a good field of fire."

So much for the terrain.

On the other hand, the French Infantry, about to be rolled up on its right flank, was practically down and out, and it was therefore a case of "friendly troops in distress in a situation where their relief must be effected even at the sacrifice of the mounted troops." Generally speaking, therefore, a Cavalry attack was called for, but the execution of the attack violated every principle known to God and man.

First, the ground had not been reconnoitered.

Second, the Brigade advanced directly through its Artillery and Infantry, completely stopping their fire at a time when it was receiving heavy flanking fire from the Landsberg.

Third, it appears that the charge itself was delivered in column, for in the official accounts, no mention is made of the 6th Cuirassiers and the 6th Lancers deploying; and if this is true, then the elements of disaster were all present.
Now let us assume, on the contrary, an equal body of well mounted, first rate Cavalry, as the French undoubtedly were, under an experienced and resolute leader. Such a man would not have ridden directly through his own Artillery and Infantry and deprived himself of this fire support, but would have moved down the Eberbach valley to a covered position on the Prussian flank. There was an excellent position in that valley west of Morsbronn. From this position, the Prussian line could have been approached under cover to within a short distance of its left flank. Had the charge then, supported by Infantry mitrailleuse and artillery fire, been delivered from this cover, with the Lancers in the first line, in extended order, the 8th Cuirassiers following close in rear, and the 9th in hand as a last reserve, the results would probably have satisfied any Cavalry leader. Had the wavering Prussian Infantry suddenly been struck in flank by the charging Brigade, the French right would undoubtedly have been able to reestablish itself. As it was, Colonel Maude says: "This chivalrous advance of the Cavalry had enabled the French Infantry of the extreme right wing to withdraw unmolested." It had, therefore, accomplished the relief of the Infantry, but at a fearful sacrifice. How much more might have been accomplished under proper leadership, with a better direction of attack and suitable formation. It is interesting to note that this attack was broken up by Infantry alone, and before the days of modern machine guns.

IV. CONCLUSIONS:

What lessons then can we draw from the actions described above? First of all:

The days of Zieten, Seydlitz and Murat are gone forever. With large Cavalry units such as brigades and divisions mounted attacks against Infantry will be exceedingly rare and probably only resorted to as a last sacrifice to relieve worn out and shaken Infantry; they have slight chances of success as modern weapons make it absolutely essential that attacking Cavalry must have sur-
prise and surprise for such large units is almost out of the question. It
is true a Cavalry division may attack mounted with part of its force, say a
regiment, using the remainder for dismounted fire fight to cover the movement
of the mounted force. This then results in "combined action" which of course
brings the actual mounted attack into the category of "smaller units". The
larger the Cavalry unit, the greater the difficulty of coordinated action and
the more will Cavalry have to seek opportunity to participate by fighting
dismounted in the battle, and mounted attacks in division formation are out of
the question. In the machine gun the Infantry has received an arm which is
absolutely annihilating against tall and broad targets.

Second:

Successful charges of Cavalry on Infantry, on a small scale, have
succeeded in the last war and may still be successful even when the Cavalry is
inferior in number to the others. But as a rule such charge can be crowned
with victory only when the enemy's infantry, owing to surprise, stress of
battle, a mishap or some other cause, has lost somewhat of its power of resis-
tance. A frontal charge against Infantry will seldom succeed. In any case we
will have to prepare the success of mounted attack by the fire fight of rifles
and machine guns and when conditions are otherwise favorable the success of
such mounted attacks will depend on the efficiency of our fire support on those
elements of the enemy's dismounted lines receiving our mounted attack.

Third:

The war showed again that our American Cavalry organization and train-
ing was and is sound as proven by the splendid example of the British Cavalry
which was the only European Cavalry which was trained similarly to our own,
that is, to fight equally well mounted or dismounted.

A final word as to the coming mechanization: Strange to say many
cavalrymen belittle and bemoan it. WHY? Does not the new light, fast tank
with an effective fire and movement speed of over 20 miles per hour cross
country represent the finest adjunct to Cavalry action we can ask for?
Imagine a Cavalry regiment or even brigade attacking in open order in successive waves preceded by a battalion of light, fast tanks! What a combination! The moving fortresses of fire closely followed by the horsemen with cold steel! What troops would stand against it?

Wake up Cavalry! Fight to get the fast tank as your own weapon!

The merit of this study would have been increased had the following procedure been observed:

a. Study presented in staff notes form,
b. Indicate sources throughout study in conformity with instructions.
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MAPS

A - - - - - - El Maghar
B v - - - - - Beersheba
C - - - - - - Nahr Falik
D -- - - - - Villeselve
E -- - - - - Moreuil Wood
F -- - - - - Woerth
Operations in Defense of Amiens

Map "E"

Action at Morval 1918
FIRST ATTACK
of XIth CORPS, 12-1 pm
(The arrows show the charge of French Cavalry)

Map "F"